

# Mountain Bluebird

## Description:

In open areas of the American West, a common sight is the male mountain bluebird who flashes a breathtaking, brilliant turquoise blue across the landscape. This sight is especially noteworthy in late winter when the return of the mountain bluebird is a welcome sign of spring. Designated as Idaho's State Bird in 1931, the mountain bluebird is said to "carry the sky on its back."

## Not Really Blue? They Look Blue to Me!

You might not have known that a bluebird's individual feather is not actually blue. How does that work? Well, an almost black pigment is produced in their growing feathers. When light hits the feathers, it reflects and scatters the light throughout the tiny air sacs and makes the feathers appear blue.

Unlike the two other North American bluebird species, male mountain bluebirds have no chestnut red on their bodies. The head, back, wings, and tail are all a bright turquoise blue. From the chin to the belly is a paler blue while the belly and undertail coverts are grayish-white. Females have brownish gray upperparts while their wings, rump, and tail are a pale or light blue. Juveniles look like adult females, but they are darker and less colorful. Their breasts and sides are streaked with brown.

The voice of a mountain bluebird sounds like soft warbling whistles. Listen to recordings of a mountain bluebird, an eastern bluebird, and a western bluebird from the Library of Natural Sounds' Bird Songs of the Rocky Mountain States and Provinces 3-CD audio guide: Mountain Bluebird [250k] Eastern Bluebird [263k] Western Bluebird [234k] OR from Cornell Lab of Ornithology Listen to songs of this species

## Confusing Females!

Although male mountain bluebirds are unmistakable, the females look much like western bluebird and eastern bluebird females, although female mountain bluebirds have no chestnut on the breast like the other two species. Western and eastern bluebirds are deeper blue with reddish chests. Mountain bluebirds are slimmer with longer wings and a longer tail, and have a more graceful, swallow-like flight than other bluebirds. The mountain bluebird prefers more open habitats than the other bluebirds and can be found in colder regions in winter. Comparison Photos here

## At Home in the Mountains

As its name states, the mountain bluebird breeds in high mountain meadows, with scattered trees, short grasses and few shrubs, usually at elevations up to 12,350 feet. In winter, it moves to lower elevations, where it occurs on plains and grasslands. Mountain bluebirds avoid areas of high grass to avoid predators, and prefer very short grass. Newly burned areas, especially those with standing dead trees in which woodpeckers create many potential nest cavities, provide appropriate bluebird habitat and are frequently used.

## Not on a Strict Diet

Mountain bluebirds aren't picky eaters. They feed on a variety of insects, including beetles, weevils, ants, wasps, cicadas, flies, grasshoppers, katydids, and crickets. Like their eastern and western relatives, mountain bluebirds will also take advantage of seeds and berries such as currants, grapes, elderberries, mistletoe, and hackberries. They frequently hover low over the ground and drop down to catch insects and other arthropods, or dart out from a branch and then return to another perch.

## Predators

Because of their early spring arrival, late spring snowstorms occasionally prove fatal for many mountain bluebirds. Flickers, swallows, house sparrows, and starlings compete for bluebird nesting sites, and raccoons prey upon their eggs. Birds of prey, especially kestrels, are the more common predators of the adult bluebird.

## Tough to Find a Nest

Mountain bluebirds are solitary nesters, but pairs may nest in close proximity to others depending on nest site availability. The female chooses a nest site, which can be any natural cavity, abandoned woodpecker hole, cliff crevice, or nest box in which she builds the nest. They often reuse nesting sites year after year and even within the same season. The first eggs are laid between late April and early May, one egg per day until about five to six eggs are laid. The eggs are smooth, glossy, unmarked, and are pale blue to bluish-white.

The abundance of mountain bluebirds in a given area is limited by nest-site availability. In the past, humans removed dead standing timber. Bluebird populations suffered declines from this loss of habitat. The importance of dead snags for many creatures, however, has been recognized and many of these useful snags have been left standing. In addition, nestbox programs have provided valuable nest sites for bluebirds all across the United States and Canada.

The female does the majority of the incubation. Males often feed their mates during this period and they continue to do so after the eggs hatch. The nestlings leave the nest after 17 to 22 days. If a nesting attempt fails, mountain bluebirds will renest, usually raising two sets of young in a breeding season.

## Where do I Look to Find a Bluebird?

It can depend on the season. Mountain bluebirds are the most migratory of the three bluebird species, migrating to the southern United States, Great Plains, central Mexico, with a few individuals straying irregularly as far as the East Coast. Birds in the northern portion of the range begin to migrate sooner than those living in the southern portion. Mountain bluebirds can survive temperatures as low as 10 degrees Fahrenheit so they are found in colder regions than western bluebirds. The extent of winter migration depends on the availability of food and the severity of the winter.

Mountain bluebirds are found throughout western North America, from southwestern Alaska to the Southwest at elevations above 5,000 feet. This species often occurs outside its normal range in



Mountain Bluebird  
© IDFG

*No Footprint*  
Footprint

*No Map*  
Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Mountain Bluebird
2. **Scientific Name:** *Sialia currucoides*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Weight: 1.06 oz.  
Length: 6-8 inches.
5. **Diet:** Insects, arthropods, occasionally small fruits.
6. **Young:** 5 or 6 pale blue-white eggs; two broods per breeding season.
7. **Lifespan:** 3-7 years.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia  
Phylum: Chordata  
Class: Aves  
Order: Passeriformes  
Family: Turdidae
9. **Hunted In Idaho:** No
10. **Hunting Link:**

winter.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the population of mountain bluebirds increased as logging and grazing activities spread west. Then, with the spread of fire-suppression practices and the decline in logging and grazing in some areas, the population declined again. The population of mountain bluebirds now appears to be relatively low but stable.